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Atari Online News, Etc.
A-ONE Online Magazine
Dana P. Jacobson, Publisher/Managing Editor
Joseph Mirando, Managing Editor
Rob Mahlert, Associate Editor

Atari Online News, Etc. Staff

Dana P. Jacobson -- Editor
Joe Mirando -- "People Are Talking"
Michael Burkley -- "Unabashed Atariophile"
Albert Dayes -- "CC: Classic Chips"
Rob Mahlert -- Web site
Thomas J. Andrews -- "Keeper of the Flame"

With Contributions by:

Kevin Savetz
Paul Caillet

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->From the Editor’s Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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The world is full of all sorts of depressing news these days. I’m sure that you’ve all witnessed these stories almost daily like I have. Heck, I’m even "guilty" of expressing my own woes from time to time. It’s not often that you hear of a depressing story that has a happy ending.

As many of you who are long-time readers of A-ONE are probably aware, I’ve been an animal lover all of my life. I’ve either owned animals or lived around them. At the present time, my wife and I are proud parents of two dogs and three birds. We’re not perfect "parents" and our "kids" are certainly not the most well-behaved at all times! But to us, these animals are our family; we have no children.

Last week on our local television news, there was a story of a young shepherd mix dog that somehow dug under his owners chainlink fence. There were kids playing in a playground a short distance away, and "Pug" must have wanted to join them. When the dog got to the playground, some kids attacked the dog. They beat, kicked, and even stabbed the dog a few times. Pug somehow managed to make his way home. He’s slowly recovering after this brutal attack. All he wanted to do was join in the fun. I’ve been keeping tabs of Pug’s recovery, and the cost to the owner. I’m even sending in a contribution which I hope will help defray the costs of Pug’s medical bills. As a pet owner who considers his pets more than just animals, I can certainly sympathize with Pug’s dad.

And in another story which you’ll see below, technology helps reunite a family with a long-lost pet. "Ted", a cat, was reunited with his owner recently after being missing for ten years! Ted had been implanted with a microchip before he disappeared. He recently was brought to an animal shelter, the chip discovered under his skin, and outdated information was found and traced to his owner. What a terrific ending!

Many of us take technology for granted, and don’t realize some of what seems to be minor technological wonders. Television. You touch a button and you’re instantly presented with live coverage of world events. These days, this is taken for granted. Computers. Push a button, click a mouse, press some keys, and you’re "teleconferencing" to a relative half a world away! A small chip under the skin of a pet can contain a small amount of information that is used to track down an owner. Unbelievable! And yes, both of my four-legged kids - Butkus and Buffy - have microchips implanted. And I believe that my parrot is also chipped. I hope that we never have to

take advantage of that technology, but it’s comforting to know that’s available if we should ever require it.

So what does all of this have to do with Atari computing? Well, nothing in particular - but I will make an analogy. Many people feel the need to have the "latest-and-greatest" in technology and gadgetry. If you’re Atari owners, we tend to sometimes complain about the demise of Atari and its line of computers. Why didn’t they evolve like other platforms, etc.? Well, just because our Atari machines are outdated doesn’t mean that they don’t, or can’t perform important tasks. They can. And if my simple words aren’t enough to convince you, ask Ted’s owner how vital that 10-year old outdated microchip was in reuniting him with his long-lost feline companion. It just doesn’t get any better than that!

Until next time...

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Adamas 1.8 Pre-Release 26

Hello,

(9/25/2003)

Adamas 1.8 Pre-Release 26

This Pre-Release is a Release-Candidate of the final version 1.8.
(See list of changes for details).
http://draconis.atari.org/draconis/archives/adachg.txt

Here are some screen captures done during testing.
http://draconis.atari.org/draconis/screens/screens.htm

For installation you need an installed version 1.7, because the 1.8 files are only replacements or extensions to it.

(68000)
http://draconis.atari.org/draconis/archives/ada18dev.zip

(68030)
http://draconis.atari.org/draconis/archives/ada18d30.zip

Best Regards,
Paul CAILLET

Illusion Demo by Dune Released

You can download this new and great ST-demo (1 meg+) from the link below.

http://www.dune-design.com/illusion.zip

French Version of AtarICQ Now Fully Up-to-date

Thanks to great efforts and dedication from Pascal Ricard, you can now download a package containing AtarICQ fully in French. All files and strings should be translated now, and some problems with the RSC-files have been sorted out.

As a bonus, this version also will remember the last used sound path correctly, between sessions. This bug fix will of course be present in all future versions of AtarICQ.

http://www.ataricq.org/

Commando Mega-Cart

Mark DiLuciano of Sunmark Products has announced Sunmark is now accepting pre-orders for the Atari 8-bit computer version of Commando. This unreleased prototype appears to be complete and features great graphics and gameplay. Commando is being released on Sunmark's bankswitching Mega-Cart and can be pre-ordered from http://www.sunmark.com

You can discuss Commando and view some screenshots of the game in AtariAge.com's Atari 8-bit Forum:

http://www.atariage.com/forums/viewtopic.php?t=34025

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING

compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. I had a rather interesting experience tonight. I got together for dinner with a couple of old friends from high school. One of them (an old girlfriend), I haven't seen since we graduated. I can't say that I was actually worried about how things were going to go, but I was... curious.

Now, high school was 25 years ago. Granted, there are probably plenty of you out there who have put more years between yourselves and high school than I have, and I still think of myself as being in my early 20's, so it's usually a bit of a shock when I run into someone I knew 'back then'. No, it's not that I'm in denial, and I don't have a portrait up in the attic, but I certainly don't feel my age.

The dinner was adequate, the conversation... comfortable. That was a surprise. It's interesting that people can go for two and a half decades without having any contact and then get together and seemingly pick up

exactly where they left off. I guess that's the hallmark of a good friendship. The one thing we all have in common is that we've all changed. But we've all changed in different ways, leaving one thing or another about ourselves untouched. I wasn't the only one to notice it either. Someone else mentioned it and even came up with a theory about the things that had changed being less important and less indicative of what we really are than the things that hadn't changed.

Yeah, I know. It's not exactly rocket science, but what do you expect after half a dozen cocktails?

Hey, you didn't think that I was going to go through this SOBER, did you? <grin>

Anyway, I'm now sitting here thinking about choices that I've made and that "road not taken". Nah, I've got no regrets. I've got a damned good life, and it honestly wouldn't have been as good as it is now had I made different choices.

That thing I mentioned before about some things changing while the really important things staying the same sticks with me a bit at the moment. My Atari computers have gone through some changes too. I started out with a 1040ST and moved at an unsteady pace through 1040STE, Stacy, MegaST, MegaSTE, and TT030 with either TOS (1.0, 1.2, 1.4, etc.), Geneva, MagiC, or Linux over the past 18 years. And while many facets have changed along the way, the essence of what they actually are remained the same. You've heard me say thing before, but I'll say it again... My Atari computers have always had something that my PCs and Macs lack... personality. I've never been able to put my finger on exactly what it is, but it's always like sitting down with an old friend again after an extended absence. No matter what bells or whistles Apple or Microsoft or whichever Linux distribution I happen to be using adds, I can still sit down at my STE or TT and "get down to it" like it's all I ever use. And it's a good, comfortable feeling.

Well, let's get on with the news hints, tips, and info from the UseNet.

>From the comp.sys.atari.st NewsGroup

Jason Lowmiller asks about his new acquisition:

"A friend the other day gave me a TT030 that he had sitting in his closet. I couldn't believe it when I saw and instantly fell in love with it. This is my first Atari and my first experience with the TOS/GEM systems. Does anyone have or could point me to a web site that would contain documents that could help me understand the operating system. While I was playing around with it (being a little hasty) I deleted some files from a directory and now I get three bats(?) on the screen and it halts everything from that point. I have absolutely no idea how to use the TOS/GEM system and some of the responses it gives me seems to be a bit buggy sometime. I'm sure that this TT was fitted with an earlier version of TOS, is there any way I can upgrade this? I have an e2prom burner, and was wondering if I could obtain the source of the later TOS revisions and burn it, but finding atari documentations on the internet has proved futile.

I'm also looking for a VME ATI Rage and any books that may have come with

the TT."

'DAHstra' tells Jason:

"I can't help you with the ROM burning, but if you haven't already visited the messages boards at:

http://www.atari.st or http://www.atari.org

Then it could be worth your time!"

Jason replies:

"HEY!!! THANKS A LOT! Those sites are extremely helpful."

Greg Goodwin asks about a problem he's having with HD Driver:

"Working with my Falcon in 030 mode (there's a CT60 in it, but it's not "on") I ran ICD tools one last time to make sure everything worked. [It did.] I then installed my nice new HD Driver 8.13. I had a couple of lockups after installation however, so I figured I'd repartition the drives in case HD Driver had issues with the ICD formatting. This was a big mistake. Now, regardless of whether I use ICD or HDDriver the computer freezes whenever I attempt to access the drives. This occurs when I use the AUTO folder, start from floppy, or even just try to scan the SCSI bus. What on earth happened, and does anyone have any idea how to get out of it? Both my 1.08GB and 340MB drives are failing to respond in any manner!....

Well, to respond to myself...

I suspect that I corrupted the boot sector of the hard drives. I'll report more later."

Rustynutt tells Greg:

"Power up the Falcon without a desktop.inf file or disk driver. A blank floppy should do. Might have to hold a couple of keys to get it boot to a plain desktop (I forgot which keys they are).

Try running HD Driver off the floppy from the desktop after that and see if you can use HDDRUTIL.APP (if your version still uses that).

I'm just guessing that maybe something in the desktop.inf file might be funny, worth a shot."

Well folks, that's it for this time around. I know it's short, but I'm in the process of switching to new software, and I'm a little out of my dept with it for the time being. Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - Nintendo Slashes GameCube Price!
"""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""" First E.R. Video Game!
Half-Life 2 Delayed!
And much more!

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!
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Nintendo Slashes U.S. Price of GameCube

Japanese video game company Nintendo Co. Ltd. on Wednesday cut the U.S. price of its flagging GameCube game console by a third as it looks to build momentum for the crucial holiday season.

Nintendo said the price cut to $99 from $149, which had been widely expected by game publishers and financial analysts, would take effect on Thursday.

The move makes the GameCube $80 cheaper than its two competitors, Sony Corp.'s market-leading PlayStation 2 and Microsoft Corp.'s second-place Xbox, both of which start at $179.

"Under $100 is the magic price point for consoles, we believe, and we didn't think there was any value in going to an interim step" like $129, George Harrison, Nintendo of America senior vice president of marketing, told Reuters.

The cut to $99 also makes the GameCube the same price as the company's Game Boy Advance SP handheld device, which dominates the portable gaming market.

A number of game publishers have curtailed or ended production of GameCube games, citing the platform's disappointing sales. Analysts were quick to caution that Nintendo was likely to benefit most from the news.

"Although this is a positive announcement with respect to Nintendo, we do not expect this price drop to have a dramatic effect on our expectations for the third-party publishers in our universe," Harris Nesbitt Gerard analyst Edward Williams said in a note.

Of the 10 best-selling games for the GameCube in August, according to research service NPDFunworld, six were published by Nintendo - a far higher proportion of first-party games than on any other console.

While the console has been stronger in Japan and Europe, in the United States it has settled into a firm third place, with an installed base about 29 percent smaller than that of the Xbox.

The last major game console to retail for $99 in the United States was Sega Corp.’s Dreamcast - though that price was an inventory-clearing move after Sega discontinued the console and decided to become exclusively a game publisher.

Nintendo earlier this year said it had stopped production of the GameCube because of an inventory backlog, but Harrison said production would start up again later this fall. He declined to say, though, if Wednesday’s price move foreshadowed the coming of a successor to the GameCube.

"What we’ve said about the next console is the work is under way and we would be launching at the same time as our competitors," Harrison said.

Harrison also said the fact that gamers could buy a GameCube and three games for the same price as a PS2 with no games made it a more compelling value for the holidays.

Both Sony and Microsoft have announced special bundle packages for the holiday season that involve free games, offers that ran counter to widespread industry hopes that the hardware makers would cut their prices instead.

"We do not expect Sony or Microsoft to follow suit with hardware price cuts but instead remain committed to the hardware/software bundle programs each has already announced," Williams said.

Microsoft: Xbox Price to Shadow PS2, Not GameCube

The head of Microsoft Corp’s Xbox game console business said on Thursday the company’s main benchmark when it comes to pricing would remain Sony Corp and not Nintendo Co Ltd.

The comments from Robbie Bach, Microsoft’s chief Xbox officer, followed a price cut by Nintendo in the United States on its GameCube console to $99 from $149 in a move aimed at building momentum for the crucial holiday season.

"We’ve been selling at a price premium to GameCube since the first day and I don’t think that’s going to change," Bach said at a news conference in Tokyo.

The Nintendo price cut makes the GameCube $80 cheaper than the second-placed Xbox or Sony’s market-leading PlayStation 2 (PS2), both of which start at $179.

While the GameCube has been stronger in Japan and Europe, in the United States it has settled into third place, with an installed base about 29 percent smaller than that of the Xbox.

Both Sony and Microsoft have announced special bundle packages for the holiday season that include free games - offers that dashed widespread industry hopes the hardware makers would cut their prices.

Bach said he sees the Xbox as a strong competitor to the PS2 in the video game market, which he expects to double in size in the next 10 years.

He estimates that video games have a penetration rate of about 40 percent,

but that rate can grow to 80 percent over the next decade if games become more appealing to a wider audience.

Microsoft also introduced Yoshihiro Maruyama as general manager for the Xbox business in Japan. Maruyama joins Microsoft from the U.S. subsidiary of video game software publisher Square Enix Co Ltd.

’Half-Life 2’ Game Delayed, Developer Says

Bad news for video gamers with itchy trigger fingers: alien-hunting season has been delayed.

Vivendi Universal Games said on Friday the developers of "Half-Life 2," the most heavily anticipated video game of 2003, will not release the game on Tuesday as originally planned.

A spokeswoman for VUG, a unit of Vivendi Universal said developer Valve Software announced earlier in the week that the game would not make Sept. 30 but was still targeted for an unspecified holiday release.

As of Friday afternoon, online retailer Amazon.com showed the game being released Dec. 1, while EBGames.com showed it shipping Nov. 14, and GameStop.com showed it being released Feb. 2 of next year.

Audiences were wowed at last May’s games industry trade show, E3, by a preview of the game that critics said brought a new level of realism to characters and the virtual world in which they move.

The original "Half-Life," released in 1998, is still popular among PC gamers, and a modified version of the game, called "Counter-Strike," is widely used in gaming competitions.

"Half-Life 2" stars Gordon Freeman, a scientist battling aliens from the planet Xen in a mysterious European locale known only as City 17.

"HL2" and "Doom 3" were expected to compete for the hearts and wallets of PC gamers this holiday season, but when "Doom" publisher Activision Inc. said the game would not be out until at least early next year, the path was left clear for "HL2" to dominate sales charts.

The game’s release is also expected to benefit makers of high-end computers customized for gaming - machines that use the latest components and can often cost thousands of dollars.

Computer graphics chip designers Nvidia Corp. and ATI Technologies Inc. in particular have waged a public dispute over whose chips are better suited to run the game. ATI sponsored the "HL2" demonstration at E3.

Warner Bros. Licenses First ’ER’ Video Game

Soon you too will be able to perform virtual open-heart surgery in the comfort of your living room right along side your favorite TV doctors.

The consumer products division of Warner Bros. announced on Monday that it

has licensed its hit medical drama "ER" to developer Legacy Interactive for the first-ever video game based on the show.

The PC game is set for release in fall 2004 and will be distributed by publisher Take-Two Interactive Software Inc.

Legacy is the developer behind the game versions of another NBC hit, the legal drama "Law & Order." It also has extensive experience in medical games, having designed titles like "Emergency Room Code Red" and "911 Paramedic."

Players will take on the role of an intern in an emergency room, Legacy said, and build their careers by taking part in ER cases. The game will feature the likenesses and voices of some of the show’s stars.

While it is increasingly common for movies to be licensed as video games, and vice versa, the relationship between dramatic TV and gaming is a newer one.

British developer Codemasters is making a game version of the Fox hit "American Idol," while Acclaim Entertainment Inc. is at work on a game adaptation of the ABC action hit "Alias." Earlier this year Ubi Soft Entertainment published a game based on the CBS hit "CSI."

NBC is a unit of General Electric Co., ABC is a unit of Walt Disney Co., CBS is a unit of Viacom Inc. and Fox is a unit of News Corp. Ltd.

New Games Feature Shape-Shifting, Chicken Suits

It’s time to test-drive some new games. One lets players shape-shift, another has them saving chickens, and a third ventures inside the computerized world of the 1982 movie "Tron."

Let’s start with "Alter Echo" ($50, Xbox and PlayStation 2), THQ’s game about a magic suit and a living planet.

In the year 2858, humans have discovered a shape-shifting material that is molded by psychics known as shapers. One brilliant shaper, Paavo, has improved the material and given it consciousness. It now covers an entire planet.

The player assumes the role of Nevin, a shaper who finds himself "adopted" by the suddenly sentient planet, which refers to the evil Paavo as "father" even as it tries to stop his plans.

As Nevin quips at the beginning of the game, "You have parental issues."

The underlying structure of "Alter Echo" is much like any other third-person game of fighting and exploration. Players run and jump around, battle enemies, ward off attacks, upgrade weapons, find switches to open up new areas, and kill powerful "bosses."

But "Alter Echo" has some distinctive features. Nevin, in human form, fights with a sword. But a special suit that the planet has given him lets him morph into a oversized, gun-toting marauder or an ugly little creature that can become invisible and grab enemies with its tongue.

"Alter Echo" also lets players freeze time long enough to compile a series of battle moves that can be executed in rapid succession.

It’s a novel concept that’s handled well.

Because of the fantasy violence, the game is rated for teens.

Now let’s move on to the story of a kid in a magic chicken suit. "Billy Hatcher and the Giant Egg" ($40, GameCube from Sega) is the tale of a youngster who has to stoop to wearing a ridiculous outfit so he can maneuver oversized eggs to mow down bad guys, pick up floating objects, and activate switches. Under the right circumstances, he and the eggs go flying into the air. True to his last name, Billy can also hatch some of the eggs to get special rewards. Thankfully, this does not involve sitting on them, just giving a rooster yell.

In the opening scene, evil crows take over a world populated by chickens. Menie-Funie, god of the chickens, brings in Billy, telling him that if the crows are not stopped, the blight will spread to his home.

Admittedly, the premise is bird-brained, but this is a game designed for the young and the young at heart, with vivid graphics and lots of interesting characters.

There’s almost no dialogue, so players should be old enough to read the subtitles. I liked the music, but I had to turn down the sound almost immediately because any time Billy hit an immovable object he let out a whiny grunt that was unbelievably annoying. I also found myself wondering why the game has an on-screen clock that ticks off the time in hundredths of a second.

Be advised that Billy cannot swim. The instant he hits the water, he dies, arms and legs splayed out like a procrastinating skydiver who never saw the ground coming.

"Billy Hatcher and the Giant Egg" is due out next week (Sept. 23) and is rated for everyone. Up to four people can play simultaneously.

Finally, the test drive of Buena Vista Interactive’s "Tron 2.0" was a lot shorter than I expected. This $50 shooting/racing game based on the Disney movie showed how, in some ways, PC programing hasn’t evolved much in the past decade.

When I clicked on the desktop icon to load the game, I learned that I couldn’t play because I didn’t have one of the three brands of graphics cards that the game needs.

OK. But why didn’t the developers design the game to check that BEFORE I wasted a full 28 minutes installing the program? That’s the sort of infuriating oversight I would have expected several years ago.

Certainly hard-core gamers know what brand and version of video card they have (and they seldom have compatibility problems because they have the latest and greatest). But most casual players do not. If you’re in that category, don’t buy "Tron 2.0" unless it’s from a store with a liberal return policy.

It’s another reason why console game systems like Xbox, GameCube and PlayStation 2 are so popular: When you put a disk in, you don’t have to worry about whether it will work.

"Tron 2.0" is rated for teens because of violence.

Latest Scareware Is a Creepy Delight

"Silent Hill 3" is delicious to play and highly instructive as well, because the video game reveals one of those quizzical things that distinguish humans from every other living being on Earth: We delight in scaring the bejeezus out of ourselves.

The only funny thing about this game was the suspicion I had that its designers were getting a good chuckle at terrifying me to the point of genuine irrationality.

The times I yipped in fright like a jittery lab rat made me wonder most about our nettlesome human condition. Why was I subjecting myself to such a creepy, creepy thing? And why was it so enjoyable?

"Silent Hill 3" retails for $49.99 and is available for the Playstation 2, with a PC version coming later this year.

This game, the third in Konami’s venerable "Silent Hill" franchise, puts you in the role of Heather Morris, a disaffected 15-year-old.

After meeting with a sleazy private detective, she bounces between the real world and a freakish nightmare where walls are lined with pulsating flesh, streets are littered with the remains of men in pink bunny outfits and blood-and-rust coated metal is the style of the year.

The "Silent Hill" series has always been most effective at atmosphere, and the latest installment continues to rely on the old horror trope of finding terror in mundane and wholesome places like a lakeside town, an amusement park and a shopping mall.

The series’ characteristic dense fog is back, masking hideous monsters - but not the clacking and scraping sounds they make - until they’re up close. There are plenty of long, dark corridors with something lurking at the end, and as with most good horror, you are usually without company.

Its most brilliant touch is a play on the jokey spookiness of a Disney-style benign haunted mansion, with faux frightening tour guide on the loud speakers. The tour turns into an unnerving exploration of a place that, despite its jocular tone, really is out to kill you after all.

All the while, Heather runs down dark corridors hacking headless midgets to pieces and blasting carousel animals suddenly aroused to life. In a welcome addition, the game lets you adjust the difficulty for both the action sequences and its several puzzles.

The plot is mostly incomprehensible but intriguing enough to propel you through from one action sequence to another. Your memory of a frightening past comes back only in pieces, and a devout but deeply disturbed woman named Claudia shows up now and then to tell you that you hold the key to heavenly paradise.

Sure, the writing gets bad sometimes: "Remember me and your true self as well, also that which you must become, the one who will lead us with

bloodstained hands to paradise."

Or: "I don’t know what kind of hell is waiting for me there. I’ve got no other choice."

Who writes this stuff? Computer programmers?

Still, the game delights for reasons computer gamers can’t take for granted: palpable sense of mood, strong characters and even suggestions that it’s actually trying to say something. Its dominant theme is tried and true: Suffering may be painful, yet it is crucial to life.

It also chews on issues like blind faith, materialism and the mercy of lying to protect someone you love.

Its greatest success is Heather, probably the most believable computer game character I’ve ever seen. She’s a realistic blend of teenage cynicism and naivete, humor, hostility and loneliness. The voice acting, while generally bad, occasionally rings true - watch for the scene when Heather loses someone close to her.

But the focus here is the great terror the game manages to impart. It’s not surprising that the rating is for mature gamers only, as the most effective way of killing a monster is to drop it with gunshots and finish it off with a few good kicks while it’s screaming in pain.

This is, after all, a game that loads up with an unfocused image of a teenage girl beating a blob of flesh appearing under the text: "Some parts of this game may be considered violent or cruel."

Violent, certainly. Cruel? Indeed - to the spooked-out player afraid of the dark for the first time in many years, most of all.

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A-ONE’s Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

California Enacts Toughest Anti-Spam Bill

California will prohibit Internet advertisers from sending unsolicited e-mails under the toughest law of its kind in the nation, providing for fines up to $1 million.

Gov. Gray Davis signed legislation Tuesday that targets not only the firms that package and send spam to consumers, but also the companies whose products and services are being advertised.

The measure covers all unsolicited commercial e-mail sent or received in California and imposes fines of up to $1 million per incident.

"There are no loopholes, no way of getting around it," said the bill’s

author, state Sen. Kevin Murray, a Democrat.

Washington state passed an anti-spam measure in 1998, but it didn't go as far. The Washington law provides civil penalties of $500 per message for bulk or commercial e-mail with misleading information in the subject line, invalid reply addresses or disguised paths of transmission.

A San Francisco-based marketing firm, Ferris Research, estimated that unwanted e-mails cost U.S. companies nearly $9 billion in 2002 in lost productivity, consumption of communication bandwidth and drain of technical support.

"California is sending a clear message to Internet spammers: we will not allow you to litter the information superhighway with e-mail trash," said Davis in a statement.

Spammers Now Need Permission in Britain

Spammers beware. Britain has announced that those sending unsolicited e-mail must get recipients' agreement in advance. Violators will be subject to fines of 5,000 pounds (US$8,000) or more and possible lawsuits from those they've targeted.

The rule, aimed at shrinking the heavy traffic of junk e-mail messages, also applies to unsolicited text messages sent to mobile phones, the government said Thursday.

It makes an exception in cases where the sender and recipient have done business with one another in the past, so companies will still be allowed to contact former customers with new offers and other information, the Department of Trade and Industry said.

"These regulations will help combat the global nuisance of unsolicited e-mails and texts by enshrining in law rights that give consumers more say over who can use their personal details," Communications Minister Stephen Timms said in announcing the new regulations.

But the government won't be able to touch bulk e-mailers who target Britons from outside the country, and spammers' anonymity may make it hard to impose fines even on those operating in Britain.

The ban applies only to individual addressees, not businesses. The Trade and Industry department said businesses told officials they wanted to continue receiving electronic solicitations.

Britain issued the new rules to comply with a European Union directive that requires member states to act against spam by Oct. 31. The government introduced the new rules Thursday and they will come into force on Dec. 11.

Violators will be subject to fines of up to 5,000 pounds (US$8,000) if a complaint against them is resolved by a low-level magistrates court or an unlimited fine if the case goes to a jury, the Trade and Industry department said. Those who have been damaged by illegal spam will have the right to sue, it added.

The new rules also limit companies' ability to use "cookie" files and other devices which let them obtain information about users who visit their Web

sites. Companies will now be required to ask users' permission before taking such data and retaining or selling it.

The new regulations also include an extension of a rule announced last year that allows individuals to bar telemarketers from calling them. Now businesses can choose not to receive such calls, the government said.

The Australian government announced even tougher plans to crack down on spam Thursday, proposing to fine those who send unsolicited messages up to A$1.1 million (US$726,000) a day.

Senate Panel Backs Anti-Spam Bill, Includes Jail

Internet "spammers" who flood e-mail inboxes with deceptive pitches could face up to five years in jail under a bill approved by the Senate Judiciary Committee on Thursday.

The "Criminal Spam Act of 2003" joins several other anti-spam measures advancing through Congress. Lawmakers had hoped to pass an anti-spam bill into law this year, but that looks increasingly unlikely as both chambers hope to adjourn in little more than a week.

The bill takes aim at a variety of popular spammer techniques in an effort to stamp out deceptive commercial e-mail.

Like another bill passed by the Senate Commerce Committee this summer, the Criminal Spam Act targets commercial e-mailers who falsify return addresses or otherwise try to obscure their identities. The two efforts could be combined before the Senate votes on the issue, lawmakers said earlier this year.

"The time has come to curb the growth of spam on all fronts through aggressive civil and criminal enforcement actions, as well as innovative technological solutions," said Utah Republican Sen. Orrin Hatch, who sponsored the bill along with Vermont Democratic Sen. Patrick Leahy.

Spam, or unsolicited bulk e-mail, now accounts for nearly half of all e-mail traffic, according to several estimates. Two out of three spam messages contain false information of some sort, the Federal Trade Commission said earlier this year.

The bill would make it a crime to route e-mail through another person's computer or e-mail address, a favorite spammer tactic.

Spammers who "harvest" e-mail addresses from Web sites or send out messages to millions of randomly generated addresses in so-called "dictionary attacks" would face jail time as well.

Repeat offenders could face up to five years in jail.

Efforts to pass an anti-spam bill in the House of Representatives have been stalled as lawmakers try to forge a compromise between several competing bills.

Anti-Spam Web Pages Shut Down by Attacks

Three Web sites that provide spam blocking lists have shut down as a result of crippling Internet attacks in what experts on Thursday said is an escalation in the war between spammers and opponents of unsolicited e-mails.

Anti-spam experts said that they think spammers are behind the attacks, although they have no way of proving it.

The technological war comes as Congress considers a federal anti-spam law and California adopts what is widely considered to be the toughest law in the country.

The California law, signed on Tuesday, allows people to sue spammers for $1,000 per unsolicited e-mail and up to $1 million for a spam campaign.

"This definitely marks an escalation in the spam wars," Andrew Barrett, executive director of The Spamcon Foundation, a spam watchdog group, said of the recent Internet attacks on lists used to block spam.

"Before, it was a guerrilla war ... This is the first time we've seen (spammers) employ such brazen tactics," he said.

Anti-spam advocates maintain hundreds of spam block or "black hole" lists, which are Web sites with lists of the numerical Internet protocol addresses of specific computers or e-mail servers that are unsecure or are known sources of spam.

Network administrators and Internet service providers consult the lists and block e-mails coming from those computers as part of their spam filtering techniques.

Two of those spam block lists have shut down after being attacked by denial-of-service attacks, in which compromised computers are used to send so much traffic to a Web site that it is temporarily taken down. The operator of another list shut down fearing a pending attack.

"There seems to be a methodical well-planned attempt to use pre-assembled networks of zombie machines to create sustained denial of service attacks on servers where these block lists run," said Barrett.

Monkeys.com shut down on Monday following a three-day denial of service attack over the weekend and an attack last month that lasted 10 days, list operator Ronald Guilmette said in a posting to an anti-spam news group.

"The handwriting is now on the wall," he wrote. "I will simply not be allowed to continue fighting spam."

Spam block list operator Osiriusoft.com also recently shut down its list after a denial of service attack, and on Tuesday the list maintained at Tennessee Internet service provider Compu-Net Enterprises was taken down.

Bill Larson, network administrator at Compu-Net, said in an interview on Thursday that he shut the list down because he was afraid it would be targeted with a denial of service attack.

The company was already being harassed, receiving complaints after attackers sent spam that looked like it was coming from the company's network and legitimate e-mails were getting bounced, he said.

Experts have speculated that spammers are behind a computer worm, Sobig, that surfaced earlier this year that can turn infected computers into spam relay machines.

"The black hole lists were incredibly effective until the Sobig worm started going out," Larson said.

While Guilmette complained that ISPs could do more to stop the attacks by taking the attacking computers offline, Larson said anti-spam advocates were considering other options to keep the lists going.

They are talking about having lists that are distributed across numerous computers like in a peer-to-peer network, he said. "That will make it hard, if not impossible, to take them down," he added.

However, the best solution to the problem is for people to just "not buy the products mentioned in spam" advertisements, Larson added.

Microsoft Begins to Challenge Google

Microsoft Corp. may be the most recognized software company on the planet, but when it comes to searching the Internet, people are much more likely to "Google it." Microsoft wants to change that, and it’s betting millions that someday it will be as well known for search as Google is.

The software giant’s push comes amid an exponential growth in information - on desktop computers, on online photo albums, on Web sites.

"And the more information there is out there, the more difficult it becomes to find relevant information and content," said Rob Lancaster, a senior analyst with the Boston-based Yankee Group. "The information glut, as it is popularly known, is becoming a real problem for lots of businesses."

Beefing up search is a smart move for Microsoft, Lancaster said, and should strike some fear in the hearts of Google Inc., Yahoo! Inc. and other companies that offer search engines.

It won’t be easy to shove those two aside, however. Danny Sullivan, editor of Search Engine Watch online newsletter, noted that Google and Yahoo have loyal followings.

And several other players are also trying to grab some of the multibillion-dollar possibilities in Internet searches.

IBM Corp. just announced a searching technology, called WebFountain, designed to not only find text in a variety of places online but also analyze its meaning.

Still, Microsoft has a strong position currently as one of the Web’s top three search sites.

"Unless they make some terrible mistake they’re going to continue to be a very strong player," Sullivan said. "If they’ve decided it’s important and they want to grind away at trying to solve the problem, they have a good track record of putting together good software to do that sort of thing."

Microsoft has its eyes set beyond mapping the World Wide Web.

It is developing search-related technologies to do everything from sorting through digital photos to combing through items scattered on your desktop computers.

The goal is to answer an Information Age-old problem - how do you find what you're looking for? - in a time when electronic information is becoming ever more dense.

"If you have to struggle through looking for things in hundreds of different places, it's just going to be intolerable," said Susan Dumais, a Microsoft senior researcher who is developing a tool for rapidly finding material that users have seen - regardless of whether it was an e-mail, Web site or document.

Some of Microsoft's efforts to simplify search on the Internet will soon be in place.

The new version of Microsoft's MSN Internet service, available this winter, will include a tool for retrieving digital photos based on images in the pictures. For example, users can ask their computers to retrieve all pictures that include a specific person's face or background.

But many analysts are most closely watching Microsoft's project to develop its own indexing and searching system for the Internet - and how the technology might later be deployed throughout the company.

Analysts estimate that Microsoft, which has long relied on outside companies to provide the search tool on its MSN Web site, is spending millions developing its new search engine. Microsoft won't comment on how much it is spending, how many people it is devoting to the project or what companies it might try to buy.

MSN decided several months ago it was time to create its own technology instead of relying on search companies Inktomi and Overture, said Kirk Koenigsbauer, general manager of MSN.com. He said it was unrelated to Yahoo's acquisitions in the last year of Inktomi and Overture.

Rather, Microsoft saw how important search has become, Koenigsbauer said, and contends that no one is really doing a good job sorting through the mass of Web sites to answer queries.

Indeed, if Microsoft can build a better search engine, "it's wide open at this point," said Charlene Li, an analyst with Forrester Research.

Koenigsbauer would not say when Microsoft's new search tool will appear, or what technical changes Microsoft is making to improve search.

"That's the secret sauce," he said.

But he said better personalization is one way to improve searching. For example, if MSN knows that the computer user searching for "pizza" lives in a specific ZIP code, it can deliver results of pizza places in that ZIP code.

Google and Yahoo representatives refused to comment on the potential search competition from Microsoft.

Beyond satisfying consumers, better searching can be lucrative.

Many companies pay or bid for inclusion in search sites' listings - typically in a cordoned-off section for advertisers - based on the key words the user enters. For example, a company that sells shoes might pay to be listed on queries for "Manolo Blahnik sandals."

Such paid listings are expected to generate more than $2 billion in revenue for search sites in 2003, Forrester Research's Li said.

Although Microsoft has not revealed many details about its new Longhorn operating system, the company has said it plans to build a unified file system that allows a quick search across everything in a computer, regardless of whether it is an e-mail or other specialized document.

Dumais and other Microsoft researchers are studying how people narrow down their searches for documents they've seen before and want to retrieve - using special dates as a memory cue or the sender of the document as an identifying characteristic.

Others, led by Gordon Bell in Microsoft Research's lab in San Francisco, are looking at how to build what amounts to a computer backup for people's memories.

Bell has developed a way to store phone calls, bills, pictures and music on a computer hard drive, with a search tool that can sort through it all.

AOL Settles Charges of Unfair Practices

America Online Inc. says it will improve the way it deals with customers who want to cancel their Internet service, resolving federal allegations that the company used unfair billing practices.

The Federal Trade Commission settlement announced Tuesday also requires AOL and its subsidiary, CompuServe Interactive Services Inc., to keep promises for delivering rebates for online services.

The FTC released a complaint with the settlement accusing AOL of continuing to bill its subscribers after they asked to cancel their accounts.

"No company should retain subscribers against their wishes," said Lydia Parnes, deputy director of the FTC's Bureau of Consumer Protection.

AOL said in a statement that it had worked with the FTC to resolve the matter for four years before the release of the official complaint and settlement.

"The company has always made, and continues to make, exceptional customer service and customer satisfaction a top priority," the statement said.

AOL, a unit of AOL Time Warner Inc. based in Dulles, Va., noted that the agreement does not contain any fines or admissions of wrongdoing by the company.

The settlement requires AOL to ensure that cancellation requests are promptly processed and billing stops after a request is received. The company also will begin mailing confirmation letters to customers who inquire about canceling service but change their minds.

Those customers who ultimately decide to cancel can mail or fax an enclosed form back to AOL.

The FTC also said AOL and CompuServe failed to deliver timely rebates to consumers. The companies promised a $400 cash rebate toward the purchase of a computer if consumers signed up for three years of CompuServe at $21.95 per month.

The companies said the rebates would be delivered within eight to 10 weeks, and in some cases, 45 days. But the FTC said the companies unfairly extended the time in which they delivered the rebates.

AOL and CompuServe agreed to deliver rebates on time and provide them within 30 days if no time is specified.

The FTC approved the agreement with a 5-0 vote. The settlement will be subject to public comment for 30 days before becoming final.

Makers of Kazaa Are Suing Record Labels

Turning the tables on record labels, makers of the most popular Internet song-swapping network are suing entertainment companies for copyright infringement.

Sharman Networks Ltd., the company behind the Kazaa file-sharing software, filed a federal lawsuit Monday accusing the entertainment companies of using unauthorized versions of its software in their efforts to root out users. Entertainment companies have offered bogus versions of copyright works and sent online warning messages to users.

Sharman said the companies used Kazaa Lite, an ad-less replica of its software, to get onto the network. The lawsuit also claims efforts to combat piracy on Kazaa violated terms for using the network.

Sharman’s lawsuit also revives its previous allegation that the entertainment companies violated antitrust laws by stopping Sharman and its partner from distributing authorized copies of music and movies through Kazaa.

U.S. District Judge Stephen V. Wilson rejected those claims in July but last week allowed Sharman to try again. Sharman is incorporated in the South Pacific island nation of Vanuatu with main offices in Sydney, Australia.

The Recording Industry Association of America called Sharman’s "newfound admiration for the importance of copyright law" ironic and "self-serving."

Universal Music Group and Warner Music Group declined to comment on Sharman’s latest lawsuit.

Recording companies sued 261 music fans this month, claiming they were illegally distributing hundreds of digital song files apiece over the Internet. The industry trolled file-sharing networks such as Kazaa and downloaded song files from users’ computers.

Once the industry determined a downloaded song file was a copyright work,

they issued subpoenas to Internet access providers to find out who was behind the account used to log onto the file-sharing network.

Meanwhile, the recording industry group has dropped one of the 261 lawsuits, a case filed against a 66-year-old sculptor who apparently was targeted in a case of mistaken identity.

Sarah Seabury Ward, of Newbury, Mass., was accused of illegally sharing more than 2,000 songs through Kazaa, including rapper Trick Daddy’s "I’m a Thug." The music companies threatened to hold her liable for up to $150,000 for each song.

After Ward’s lawyer complained that Ward is a "computer neophyte" who never installed file-sharing software or downloaded any songs, the case was dropped in federal court in Boston on Friday.

Opera Unveils New Browser for Windows

Opera Software ASA, one of the only commercial Web browser competitors to Microsoft Corp., rolled out its latest browser for Windows on Tuesday.

With Opera 7.20 for Windows, Opera is promising improved performance and support for additional languages. The release follows by almost a month a beta of the browser.

Performance improvements in the latest Windows version include faster Web page and user interface rendering and reformatting as well as faster JavaScript performance, officials said.

"With Opera 7.20 we again prove our determination to break new ground with every major release," said Opera CEO Jon S. von Tetzchner, in a statement.

Opera also is adding the 40-plus languages it already supports. The 7.20 version includes support for bidirectional languages, those such as Arabic and Hebrew, with a mixture of writing from left to right and from right to left.

The latest Windows browser is available at www.opera.com in either a free version with advertisements or without ads for $39.

In the ad-supported version, Opera is offering users a choice of ads in the 7.20 Windows release. Users can choose the traditional graphical ads or select the new text-based ads delivered by Google according to relevancy. Opera officials say the text-based ads are less intrusive for users.

Beyond the latest desktop browser, Opera is finding success in providing its browser for use in smart phones. That push helped Opera, a private company founded in 1994, to record last quarter its first profit since 1998 - albeit it a small one, said Opera spokesman Pal A. Hvistendahl.

The company also has begun pushing its browser, combined with Linux, as an alternative to the Windows XP operating system for use in the emerging IP television market.

Long-Gone Microchipped Cat Finds Owner

Call it Ted’s excellent adventure, with a high-tech twist: A cat with an ID microchip implanted under his skin was returned to his owner 10 years after he jumped out a window and vanished.

Chris Inglis’ sleek, black feline, Ted, was fitted with the chip back when the technology was still new in the early 1990s. But he was gone without a trace for a full decade before someone found him this week.

Ted - named for Keanu Reeves’ character in "Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure" - was brought to the Peninsula Humane Society’s animal shelter, which tracked down Inglis despite outdated information on the chip. The cat was found about 13 miles south of where Inglis used to live in Burlingame.

When the pair reunited Wednesday, the cat "rubbed his face on my hand, climbed right up and started purring," Inglis said. "It’s pretty monumental. It’s almost surreal."

Where Ted spent all those years remains a mystery, but it appeared someone had been taking care of him.

Inglis remembers that one of the things he and Ted liked to do was cruise around in his car. On their way home from the shelter, Inglis said Ted "put his front paws on the dashboard," just like in the old days.

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